



GUEST EDITORIAL

Guest editorial

Generational differences at work: introduction and overview

Keith Macky

Auckland University of Technology (AUT), Auckland, New Zealand

Dianne Gardner

Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand, and

Stewart Forsyth

FX Consultants, Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

Purpose – This introduction seeks to provide a brief background to the notion that there are generational differences at work and to introduce the papers included in this special issue of the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*.

Design/methodology/approach – The current context concerning generational differences at work is briefly outlined followed by a description of the core theory underpinning the notion of generational cohorts. Criticisms of this theoretical premise are provided before a brief outline is given to each article in the special issue.

Findings – There is evidence for changes in personality profiles across generations, and for differences in attitudes towards work and careers. However, effect sizes tend not to be large, and some findings are inconsistent with popular stereotypes regarding generational differences. Little support was found for differences in work values or motivation.

Practical implications – Contrary to popular hype concerning generational differences at work, managerial time may be better spent considering employee needs relating to age (maturity), life-cycle and career stage differences than developing generationally specific management policies and practices. Significant methodological problems remain in generational research.

Originality/value – The papers facilitate a critical understanding of the challenges facing generational research and its limitations, and provide a litmus test against which popular stereotypes can be compared.

Keywords Baby boomer generation, Age groups, Personality, Careers, Motivation (psychology), Workplace

Paper type Conceptual paper

Newspaper stories, consultant press releases, magazine articles, and increasingly books are not hard to find exhorting that there are different generational cohorts in the workforce, such as Generations X, Y and Baby Boomers, that differ from each other in ways that are important for managers. Often such reports seem little more than overly generalised and oft repeated stereotypes based either on anecdotal evidence, or data not otherwise open to critical peer review. References to Generation Y, also sometimes referred to as Echo Boomers, the Millennium Generation, Generation Next and Generation Why (Sheahan, 2006a), seem particularly common (e.g. Sheahan, 2006b; Hira, 2007). For example:



Generation Y workers. They can be fickle, high maintenance and have a sense of entitlement. But they are also technologically sophisticated and breathe life into a stodgy old company . . . They are team players, good in collaborative work environments . . . Having been praised all their lives this generation can't deal with failure . . . They expect acknowledgement even when they don't deserve it . . . They want to be put on the fast-track whether they deserve it or not . . . They dislike working long hours (Clement, 2008, p. F7).

Rarely do such generalisations seem to be challenged, or even the basic assumption that there are generational differences questioned, although there are exceptions. Giancola (2006) for example observes a lack of published research on generational differences in academic journals and suggests that "the generational approach may be more popular culture than social science" (p. 33).

Furthermore, the empirical research that does exist is not a good fit with stereotypes about generational differences. For example, a study by Montana and Lenaghan (1999) compared four generational groups and found that generations X and Y were identical in ratings of their top six work motivators, as were the "baby boomer" and "pre-boomer" generations. The highest motivators for the X and Y cohorts were steady employment and promotional opportunities, while steady employment did not make it into the top six of the boomer and pre-boomer generations. In a comprehensive Australian study (Hart *et al.*, 2003), the pattern of relationships linking leadership, organisational climate and work attitudes such as commitment were found to be similar across Generation X and Baby Boomer employees. Another Australasian study (Levy *et al.*, 2005) also found little difference in attitudes toward leadership of Generation X and Y followers. Finally, one study that did report generational differences (Jurkiewicz, 2000) found these to be contrary to stereotypes on generational differences.

But why should one generation differ from another in ways that matter to managers? As a construct, a generational cohort refers to an "identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages" (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). Differences between generations are theorised to occur because of major influences in the environment within which early human socialization occurs; influences that impact on the development of personality, values, beliefs and expectations that, once formed, are stable into adulthood. Of particular significance to the generational approach are major shifts in the sociocultural environment over time; highly salient events that one generation experiences but another either does not, or experiences them outside of their critical socialisation years (Noble and Schewe, 2003; O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997; Twenge, 2000). These potential salient sociocultural events are numerous indeed, including wars and the consequences of wars (Noble and Schewe, 2003), new technologies resulting in major life and work changes in the developed economies, and significant changes to family and work patterns (Layard and Mincer, 1985). Major political events may also be important, such as the Cold War and threat of nuclear armageddon, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union. Also potentially influential are major socioeconomic transitions, such as the relatively recent rise of corporate multinational capitalism, periodic share market collapses, depressions and sustained recessions, pervading unemployment rates, and the loss of job security through the 1980s-1990s due to downsizings, restructurings, privatisations, and more recently offshoring. Socioeconomic events resulting in either relative scarcity or security may be particularly salient for generational differences (Egri and Ralston, 2004). As each

generation matures through such events, then so each generation is purported to develop characteristics that differentiate it from those that precede and follow it; characteristics that will be reflected in personality traits, work values, attitudes, and motivations to work in ways presumed to be important to managers (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola and Sutton, 2002).

This core theoretical premise underpinning generational differences is not however without criticism. There are, for example, problems in determining the exact temporal point at which to segregate the various generations (and some differences between studies on this, although the default option seems to be the Strauss and Howe (1991) typology). Nor can it be assumed that all members of any given generation will experience the same key sociocultural or socioeconomic events in the same way (Giancola, 2006); that is, independent of social class, gender, ethnicity, or national culture, for example. Furthermore, as many of the contributors to this special issue comment on, and Rhodes (1983) long ago identified, it is difficult to separate out differences attributed to generational cohort membership from what may in fact be differences arising from age (maturity), career or life-cycle stage. Concomitant with age are organizational tenure differences giving rise to variable organizational experiences, which also impact on many of the attitudinal variables of interest to generational researchers and commentators.

It is against this background of widespread public acceptance, but limited empirical and theoretical endeavour, that we invited conceptual and empirical scholarly contributions to the generational discourse. We begin this special issue with a major review by Twenge and Campbell of data collected from over 1.4 million people in the USA since the 1930s, enabling generational comparisons over time on a number of important psychological traits, including narcissism, self-esteem, anxiety and locus of control. Observed differences across generations on such psychological dimensions are potentially significant influences on workplace behaviour, the implications of which for management and HR practices are drawn by the authors. Of particular note are the observed higher levels of narcissism, anxiety and depression for Generation Y, combined with lower needs for social approval and a stronger external locus of control. This is followed by an empirical paper by Wong, Gardiner, Lang and Coulon analysing data from a large Australian sample of managers and professionals using the occupational personality questionnaire (OPQ32) and motivational questionnaire (MQ). While Wong et al. find few meaningful generational differences in personality and motivational drivers in the workplace for their sample, they do conclude that managers may need to be prepared to deal with increasing levels of cynicism, negativity and less optimism in the younger generations.

The focus then shifts from personality and motivations to Cennamo and Gardner's study of work attitudes and values. This is a multi-industry study of New Zealand employees comparing Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y on their work values, job satisfaction and organisational commitment. If major sociocultural and socioeconomic events have the potential to influence personality development, then it is reasonable to posit that such events might also shape generational work values. While work attitudes are by definition affective responses to immediate or recent work experiences, they also contain a cognitive component such that the employees' perceptions of their work environment should be filtered by a generational lens of traits, values, beliefs and expectations (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Attitudinal differences would also be observable if employees from different generations are treated differently by

managers, and or if they do have different cohort related experiences of work. Cennamo and Gardner found that while the fit between individual and organisational work values was related to satisfaction, organisational commitment and intentions to leave for all generations, there were few differences in work values between generations.

Dries, Pepermans and De Kerpel then extend the idea of generational differences in general and work-related values to explore the meaning of career success through a generational lens. Using a Belgian sample, they found that actual career types differed across generations while preferences for different career types and evaluations of the factors representing career success showed few differences. Of particular note is the value that all generational groups attached to job security, but with the oldest and youngest generational groups placing the highest importance on this career influence.

Finally, the special issue concludes with an empirical investigation from D'Amato and Herzfeldt of over 1,600 managers across Europe highlighting the potential for generational cohort membership to impact on employee retention, and the role that people's learning orientations and intentions to engage in developing leadership capabilities play in this relationship. Differences in learning orientation and leadership development intentions among generation groups were found which had important implications for organisational commitment and intentions to stay with the organisation. They argue that, at least among managers, there may be value in generational-specific HR practices that take into account different aims and intentions among different groups.

To conclude, the contributors to this special issue identify a number of interesting findings regarding changes in the personality profiles across generations, and changes in their attitudes to work and careers. However many of the empirical findings are less strong and consistent than popular sentiment suggests. Indeed, there may be more variation among members within a generation than there is between generations.

Significant issues remain for future studies using the generational approach to address. In particular, and perhaps the most difficult to resolve, is to tease out the confounding effects of age, maturation and life cycle stage on generational cohorts. Twenge and Campbell's study addresses this to some extent, but the cross-sectional nature of most generational research leaves the problem unresolved. There is also clearly room for more cross-cultural research, given the potential for variation in the experience of sociocultural and socioeconomic events for people in different countries, and in different strata within countries. While this issue draws on samples from the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Europe, there is clearly a need for more comparative studies to test the notion that generational cohorts are shaped by the significant political, economic, cultural and other events of their times.

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Ad hoc reviewers

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Corresponding author

Keith Macky can be contacted at: keith.macky@aut.ac.nz

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